

Opportunities for Central Asian Integration (The Case of Uzbekistan)

Shamsiyev Saidakbar

University of World Economy and Diplomacy Student

Abstract: In the current context of shifting power dynamics in international relations, the attention of major power centers is once again focused on the Central Asian region. The states of the region are striving to maintain a balance of power and ensure stability by pursuing policies based on mutual trust. In this process, discussions and analyses regarding Central Asian integration are gaining significant traction in both local and international media. This analytical article examines the opportunities for Central Asian integration, with a specific focus on Uzbekistan as a case study.

Keywords: Central Asia, economic cooperation, political will, cultural unity, international politics, “Great Game”, Consultative Meeting, International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), regional cooperation.

Introduction In the modern world, Central Asia is striving to assert itself as a unified entity in the international political arena, and this aspiration is shaping how global powers engage with the region. Major power centers such as the United States and China, along with regional leaders like the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Germany, and supranational entities like the European Union, have responded positively to this approach, as evidenced by the emergence of the “C5+” format on the global stage. However, how close is Central Asian unity to becoming a reality? Do the countries of the region view this concept with a shared perspective? What form and structure should a Central Asian Union take? These questions remain partially unresolved both within the region and in global political discourse.

Today, the leaders of Central Asian states are deliberating over the potential pathways for integration—evaluating the areas where it can be achieved and identifying those where it might pose a threat to sovereignty. Think tanks, researchers, and analysts are conducting studies on the internal and external forces influencing this integration, along with the challenges, opportunities, frameworks, and recommendations. Furthermore, numerous conferences, academic forums, and roundtable discussions have been organized to foster debate, exchange ideas and provide scientific insights on the prospects of Central Asian integration.

Historically, the region was a battleground for two great empires during the 19th century, becoming a victim of the “Great Game”—a fact that history has not forgotten. The current push for unity raises critical questions: Is this an effort to escape such geopolitical games, or to become a part of them? The rules of international politics are evolving, and the balance of power is encountering significant obstacles as the global order shifts toward a new equilibrium. The precise nature of the next international order remains uncertain.

History and Shared Challenges in Central Asia

History is distinguished by its depth of mysteries and lessons. It has witnessed the rise and fall of countless empires, states, and kingdoms, and continues to record the trajectory of nations’ internal and external politics. Today, the Central Asian countries are striving to etch their names in history as

nations that emerged victorious. The ultimate embodiment of this victory lies in the realization of a Central Asian Union.

But what exactly is the Central Asian Union? It is the collective unification of the region, a conscious recognition of their shared geography, adherence to the principles of unity across all domains, and integration to its deepest levels. If we compare it to modern alliances, the European Union is primarily an economic integration, with economy, finance, and industry serving as its unifying pillars. In contrast, Central Asia is driven toward integration by shared challenges and external threats.

The foundation of this union lies in the similarities of language, culture, and religion. Among the pressing shared challenges is the environmental crisis surrounding the Aral Sea, which has disproportionately affected Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and to some extent, Turkmenistan. Water scarcity is another critical issue for the region. Countries like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan pay significant attention to water-related concerns. For instance, while Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are cooperating on the Kambarata hydropower plant through consultative efforts, the same level of collaboration is harder to observe concerning the Rogun hydropower plant. Additionally, Afghanistan's Taliban-led “Qushtepa” canal project has raised alarms for the governments of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Another unifying factor for Central Asian states is the increasing pressure from the north. Since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the subsequent sanctions on Russia, Moscow's demands and focus on Central Asia have intensified. Russia's political and economic ambitions, coupled with its rhetoric, are closely monitored—sometimes with concern—by the region's populations. Kazakhstan, sharing the longest border with Russia, appears to be the most affected, as evidenced by President Tokayev's recent article, which proposed the idea of establishing a “Central Asian Security Alliance.”

In essence, each Central Asian state is interconnected through specific regional challenges and mutual interests, compelling them to consider and engage in regional cooperation. The success of such collaboration depends significantly on the level of mutual understanding and diplomacy among the states.

The Historical Foundation of Central Asian Integration

In international politics, achieving tangible outcomes requires a strong historical foundation. The establishment of a Central Asian Union is no exception, as its roots are deeply embedded in the region's history. How did the concept of Central Asia emerge? Historically, this region was known by names such as Turan and Turkestan. However, during the 19th century—the era of colonization—the Russian Empire's growing interest in the region led to its designation as “Middle Asia” encompassing the three khanates and Kazakh hordes that existed at the time. This period marked the decline of Turkic powers and saw the rise of colonial influence. The term “Central Asia” was first introduced in 1843 by Alexander von Humboldt following Britain's consolidation of India¹. Initially, this term referred to a larger geographical area than the territories of the present five Central Asian states, but over time it became more closely associated with these five nations. The geopolitical rivalry between two great empires - Russia and Great Britain - turned the region into a “Great Game” battleground, a concept exactly described by historian and political analyst Peter Hopker². In the early 20th century, the Jadids who were a group of reformist intellectuals, advocated for the unity of the region as a single entity and envisioned the creation of a unified state. However, these ideas were suppressed under Soviet rule, blamed as Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism, and many Jadid leaders were abused. The Soviet era marked a period of repression for such ideas, leading to their near disappearance. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the late 20th century, newly independent states in the region sought to rediscover their identity by rechange their

¹ Högselius, P. (2021). The hidden integration of Central Asia: the making of a region through technical infrastructures. *Central Asian Survey*, pp.1–21. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2021.1953963>

² Hopker, P. (2006). *The great game: on secret service in high Asia*. London: John Murray.

history. A shared name for the region became necessary to foster cooperation and regional identity. The term “Middle Asia” associated with colonialism, it was deemed unsuitable due to its connotations of conquest and subjugation. Instead, the term “Central Asia” proposed by Uzbekistan’s first President Islam Karimov was warmly accepted by neighboring countries. During the 1990s, regional leaders took practical steps to establish and strengthen the Central Asian Union. In 1993, the first meeting of Central Asian states was held in Tashkent, where Uzbekistan proposed the ideology of “Turkestan as Our Common Home”. This initiative aimed to unite the region’s peoples, create a single internal market and foster economic cooperation. However, the geopolitical landscape of the 1990s and 2000s presented significant challenges. After gaining independence, Central Asian states pursued different foreign policy orientations. Uzbekistan prioritized cooperation with the United States, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan leaned towards Russia. Turkmenistan declared neutrality, distancing itself from both regional and global affairs³. These differing priorities hindered the development of a unified geopolitical environment in Central Asia and fostered mistrust and rivalry among the states. Despite these challenges, efforts to deepen regional cooperation persisted. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan took positive steps, leading to the establishment of the Central Asian Union in 1994. However, the political and economic capabilities of the newly independent states were insufficient to fully realize the goals of the union.

Central Asia in the 21st Century: Renewed Interest of External Powers

The 21st century witnessed a resurgence of interest in Central Asia from global powers. The USA military intervention in Afghanistan as part of its fight against international terrorism promoted the strategic importance of the region. Alongside other major powers began to intensify their presence and influence in Central Asia. Russia sought to consolidate its regional influence through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), while China expanded its engagement via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These developments highlighted Central Asia’s role as a crossroads of geopolitical interests. During this period, regional cooperation within Central Asia suffered setbacks. The “Consultative Meetings” among Central Asian states paused for a significant time, largely due to growing concerns over terrorism and each state’s focus on safeguarding to national security. Strained relations among the regional states persisted until a leadership transition in Uzbekistan in 2016.

The election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as Uzbekistan’s president marked a turning point for regional diplomacy. President the administration of Mirziyoyev prioritized mending and enhancing relations with neighboring countries. By 2017, discussions and analyses of Central Asian integration gained momentum not only within Uzbekistan but across the entire region. This shift reflected a growing recognition of the mutual benefits of collaboration in addressing shared challenges and leveraging collective opportunities.

The Perspective of Uzbekistan on Central Asian Integration

Examining Central Asian integration from Uzbekistan's perspective requires analyzing the process through multiple dimensions:

Political and Security Opportunities of Central Asian Integration (In the context of Uzbekistan)

Integration of Central Asia is inherently a political process. States always prioritize their political existence, territorial integrity and security. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the political opportunities within regional integration. It is known that Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan, is one of the regions that does not have direct access to the oceans. The geopolitical position of the region is complex and risky, as neighboring states are powerful nuclear-armed countries, with Iran being the only non-nuclear state but a primary contender. Zbigniew Brzezinski, in his book “Second chance” views the Central Asian region as part of the “New Global Balkan” and emphasizes that it

³ Admin, I. (n.d.). Prospects for Regional Integration in Central Asia. [online] Items. Available at: <https://items.ssrc.org/after-september-11/prospects-for-regional-integration-in-central-asia/>.

will remain a central point in international relations throughout the 21st century⁴. In the region, countries are becoming more linked to the global market, particularly through transport connectivity, which is becoming evident due to Russia's military conflict with Ukraine. In present world, where great powers are competing for influence and applying pressure on smaller states. Central Asian countries should pursue a unified foreign policy. In this regard, developing a common foreign policy concept would be a wise decision. For the first time in 2018, after a 20-year break, the "Consultative Meetings" of Central Asian leaders were held. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev played a significant role in organizing this meeting, for which he commended Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, noting that the meeting, being held on the eve of the Navruz holiday, had deep symbolic meaning⁵. The second "Consultative Meeting" was hosted by Tashkent, where, for the first time, all the Central Asian heads of state participated. During this meeting, President Mirziyoyev emphasized the need to view regional issues from a unified perspective, resolve them through collective efforts and transform Central Asia into a region free from the competition of major powers. In October of the same year, the next "Consultative Meeting" was held in Bishkek, where the need for Central Asian states to act in unity during times of global threats was again highlighted. After gaining independence, Central Asian states aimed to make the region a zone free from nuclear weapons. In 1997, a major conference was held and on September 8, 2006, the Semipalatinsk Agreement on making Central Asia a "Nuclear-Free Zone" (CANWFZ) was signed⁶. The Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), established in recent history was expected to bring significant results especially after Russia's accession in 2004, which led to the expansion of the organization's scope into what is now the Eurasian Economic Union⁷.

In conclusion, the countries of the region participate in major organizations and structures such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). In regional integration, the creation of organizations and structures composed only of Central Asian states holds significant importance. In summary, Uzbekistan can have several political opportunities within the context of Central Asian integration:

1. Uzbekistan can be geopolitical independent in the Central Asian region and international platforms with own voice and can defend national interests.
2. Uzbekistan has the potential to influence the balance of power between the U.S. Russia and China and conduct negotiations based on national interests.
3. With its leading human capital, Uzbekistan can achieve a leadership role in the region and use this position to advance its political ambitions in international relations.

Economic Opportunities of Central Asian Integration (In the context of Uzbekistan)

After politics, the most important area for states is the economy. Central Asian states are considered developing countries, also Uzbekistan. Looking at the economic potential of the current Central Asian states, Uzbekistan's trade turnover with Kazakhstan amounts to \$4.3 billion, with Turkmenistan it is \$1.092 billion, and with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is \$953.8 million and \$756.6 million, respectively⁸. Overall, Uzbekistan's trade turnover with Central Asian countries is nearly

⁴ Brzezinski, Z., 2007. 219. In: *Second Chance, Catastrophic Leadership*, first edition ed. New York (USA): Basic Books, p.156.

⁵ Bucur, M. (2015). War and Regeneration: The Great War and Eugenics in Eastern Europe. *Region*, [online] 4(1), pp.31–43. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43737558> [Accessed 8 Apr. 2020].

⁶ www.un.org. (n.d.). Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia | United Nations Platform for Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones. [online] Available at: <https://www.un.org/nwzf/content/treaty-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-central-asia>

⁷ Safoyev, S., 2005. Globalizatsiya va mintaqaviy hamkorlik muammolari. In: II. Ipecc, ed. *Markaziy Osiyoning geosiyosati*. Tashkent: T Rustamov, p. 160

⁸ Statista. (2023). Uzbekistan: trade value with CIS countries 2023 | Statista. [online] Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1350400/uzbekistan-trade-value-with-cis-countries/> [Accessed 17 Dec. 2024].

\$6 billion. Uzbekistan continues cooperation with Kazakhstan in the automotive, agricultural machinery and textile industries, while also starting major projects with Kyrgyzstan in mining, metals and textiles⁹. Regional interconnection is based on important economic cooperation, with proper utilization of water resources and energy resources being of the greatest importance.

Central Asian countries are focusing on integration through water and energy security. For example, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan provide 80%–90% of their energy through hydropower plants (HPPs), while Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan rely on natural resources to meet 80% to 100% of their energy needs. In 2009, the Central Asia Water and Energy Project (CAWEP), funded by the EU, Switzerland and the UK was launched. By November 2023, \$3.78 billion had been invested in 23 projects under this initiative¹⁰. One of the goals of the project is to turn the region into a unified energy space, prevent ecological problems, and create opportunities for efficient water resource use. In 2023, a forum was held under the UK's mediation, where representatives from financial sectors of Central Asian countries discussed energy security and the challenges of economic interconnectivity. At this forum, the World Bank's REMIT (Regional Electricity Market Interconnectivity and Trade Project) was promoted¹¹.

When considering regional economic cooperation, it is crucial to take into account the significant transport-logistical potential of Central Asia. The region is strategically located at the heart of the Eurasian wilderness and serves as a key land corridor connecting the East and West. Particularly, Uzbekistan which shares borders with all other Central Asian countries has enormous logistical potential. It is not only a vital connection between the East and West but also between the North and South, making it a crucial strategic location. Today, China which is the world's second-largest economy is trying to use Central Asian logistics to transport its goods to the West. The “one Belt and one Road” initiative that China promotes involves reaching Western markets through the region. This major project currently has two transport routes: the shortest route goes through China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran to reach Turkey and Europe, while the other goes through China and huge deserts of Kazakhstan to reach the Caspian Sea.

The key financier of this large-scale initiative is China and it has reached final agreements on the construction of a railway through Uzbekistan. The construction of the railway is set to begin in December 2024, with a total length of 486 km. The estimated value of the project is \$4.7 billion, with a joint venture established where China holds a 51% stake, while Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan each hold 24.5%¹². From the perspective of regional integration, this project will enable greater transport-logistical interconnection among Central Asian countries. This will undoubtedly bring significant benefits to Uzbekistan's growing economy.

In conclusion, Central Asian economic integration offers several opportunities for Uzbekistan:

1. As a result of integration, Uzbekistan could gain access to large markets for its products.
2. Through regional integration, Uzbekistan would have the opportunity to utilize cheaper resource sources, benefiting its developing economy.

⁹ The Prospect of Cooperation and Integration Among Central Asian States. (2023). Available at: https://nesa-center.org/dev/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2023-0113_The-Prospect-of-Cooperation-and-Integration-among-Central-Asian-States.pdf

¹⁰ World Bank. (n.d.). Regional Cooperation Reduces Poverty and Builds Resilience in Central Asia. [online] Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2023/12/06/regional-cooperation-reduces-poverty-and-builds-resilience-in-central-asia>

¹¹ The World Bank Regional Electricity Market Interconnectivity and Trade -Central Asia(P181214) Project Information Document (PID). (2023). Available at: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099100523132539287/pdf/P1812140c755ef090b30f0c40a9dc5720c.pdf> [Accessed 22 Dec. 2024].

¹² Газета.uz. (2024). Construction of China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway to begin on 27 December. [online] Available at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/en/2024/12/23/uzb-kg-china/> [Accessed 28 Jan. 2025].

3. Regional integration would also improve Uzbekistan's ability to address economic challenges related to water and energy resources.

Social-Cultural Opportunities of Central Asian Integration (In the context of Uzbekistan)

The people who are living in the Central Asian region have historically been close in terms of culture, religion, social tradition and identity. The indigenous peoples of this region, such as the Massagetae, Sogdians, Khorezmians, Scythians, underwent Turko-civilization due to the migration of large Turkic tribes from the East at the beginning of the Common Era. During the period of the Great Turkic Khaganate, the geographical area of the region expanded and became known as Turan. Later, following the Arab invasions in the 7th century, the population of the region adopted Islam, and people identified themselves as Muslims while also recognizing their tribal heritage. This situation continued until the Soviet Union carried out administrative-territorial divisions in the region. During the Soviet era, the peoples of the region began to rediscover their ethnic identities and national affiliation became prominent¹³. The ideological re-education that took place during the Soviet period still poses challenges today. The region is experiencing significant population growth, and it is important to clarify and effectively explain the cultural identity of the peoples. In terms of population size, Uzbekistan stands out as the leader in the region, with a population of over 36.3 million as of 2024, followed by Kazakhstan with 20.5 million, Tajikistan with 10.5 million, Kyrgyzstan with about 7.5 million, and Turkmenistan with 7.1 million¹⁴. The cultural integration of the people of the region is a crucial aspect, as it helps people to recognize themselves as part of a single geographical region. Uzbekistan is making significant efforts in this regard. Central Asia located at the crossroads of the ancient Silk Road, it has always been a region that embraced various cultures. In 2021, a cultural forum titled "Central Asia at the Crossroads of Cultures" was held in Khiva under the auspices of the UN¹⁵. During this event, Uzbekistan emphasized the close cultural ties of the region's peoples and stressed the importance of collaborating to preserve cultural heritage. Today, through various educational programs, students from Central Asia can exchange experiences and study at universities in other countries of the region. Further development of these efforts can yield great results in strengthening cultural cooperation and mutual understanding across Central Asia.

Technological Opportunities of Central Asian Integration (In the context of Uzbekistan)

Currently, the countries of Central Asia, particularly Uzbekistan, are working on utilizing and developing various technological opportunities in cooperation with other regional states. These include agriculture, water resource management technologies, industrial technologies, construction technologies and others. The United Nations is supporting technological and innovative development through various projects to help the region grow. One such project is the *Special Program for Economies of Central Asia* (SPECA), which focuses on developing digital and green economies and technologies in the region. A plan for the years 2022-2026 has already been developed for this initiative¹⁶. While the project targets the development of innovative and digital technologies in the region, it plays a significant role in promoting technological integration across Central Asia.

¹³ study.com. (2023). Central Asia History, Countries & Culture | Study.com. [online] Available at: <https://study.com/academy/lesson/history-central-asia-people-culture-religion.html> [Accessed 22 Dec. 2024].

¹⁴ worldometer (2019). Population of Central Asia (2019) - Worldometers. [online] Worldometers.info. Available at: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/central-asia-population/>

¹⁵ Unesco.org. (2021). Cultural Forum 'Central Asia at the Crossroads of Civilizations', Khiva, Uzbekistan, 2021 | Silk Roads Programme. [online] Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/cultural-forum-central-asia-crossroads-civilizations-khiva-uzbekistan-2021> [Accessed 22 Dec. 2024].

¹⁶ ESCAP. (2022). Central Asian countries advance cooperation on innovation and technology to promote digital transformation for sustainable development. [online] Available at: <https://www.unescap.org/news/central-asian-countries-advance-cooperation-innovation-and-technology-promote-digital> [Accessed 22 Dec. 2024].

The strengthening of technological cooperation in the region began especially after the pandemic and continues to expand in scale. This growing cooperation offers opportunities for further technological development and sharing of knowledge across the Central Asian states.

Ecological Opportunities of Central Asian Integration (In the context of Uzbekistan)

One of the facts that the Central Asian region is united more by the regional challenges and problems. Among these challenges, water scarcity and ecological risks are paramount. Some experts argue that Central Asia should unite through its shared environmental issues as this could serve as a leading factor for regional integration. In terms of water scarcity, Uzbekistan ranks 25th out of 164 countries for water shortages and 27th for overall water scarcity. The majority of Uzbekistan's water resources come from the mountainous regions of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Experts predict that by 2030, Uzbekistan's water resources could decrease by 13-14%, potentially rising to 44-46%¹⁷. Moreover, Uzbekistan is a highly agricultural country, with 30% of its economy based on Agri-industry and water is one of the most essential elements for agriculture. About 80% of Uzbekistan's water is sourced from external rivers. Despite this, Uzbekistan has been consistent in its efforts to address water issues. On November 30, 2022, the heads of state reached an agreement on cross-border and water resource management¹⁸. Additionally, in 2015, the regional countries agreed on the Management of Transboundary Rivers in Central Asia which was another significant step toward collaboration¹⁹. One of the biggest ecological challenges the region faces is the Aral Sea crisis, which has caused environmental damage to all Central Asian countries. Since the 1960s the Aral Sea which once had a volume of 56 cubic kilometers and an area of 5.5 million hectares it has lost over 90% of its water. In response, the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea was established in 1993, and a series of programs (ASBM-1, ASBP-2, ASBM-3) were launched. On August 29, 2015, Uzbekistan initiated the Comprehensive Program for Mitigating the Effects of the Aral Sea Disaster, Restoring Coastal Areas and Socio-Economic Development for the years 2015–2018²⁰. Another issue of growing concern in the region is the Qushtepa Canal in Afghanistan which is taking up approximately 30% of the Amu Darya's water and could pose another potential problem for the region²¹.

Conclusion: Through regional integration, Uzbekistan can access several ecological opportunities:

1. The water issues of Uzbekistan can be addressed through peaceful negotiations and regional cooperation.
2. The Aral Sea crisis could be mitigated, reducing ecological disasters, pollution, diseases, and damage to wildlife.
3. Regional cooperation could lead to agreements and solutions to other significant environmental challenges in the region.

¹⁷ Anon, (2023). The water crisis in Central Asia – how to find solutions? - CANEECCA: Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA). [online] Available at: <https://canecca.org/en/the-water-crisis-in-central-asia-how-to-find-solutions/>

¹⁸ president, U. (2022). Uzbek president signs laws ratifying border, water resource accords with Kyrgyzstan. [online] Aa.com.tr. Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/uzbek-president-signs-laws-ratifying-border-water-resource-accords-with-kyrgyzstan/2752252> [Accessed 22 Dec. 2024].

¹⁹ Janusz-Pawletta, B. and Gubaidullina, M. (2015). Transboundary Water Management in Central Asia. *Cahiers d'Asie centrale*, [online] (25), pp.195–215. Available at: <https://journals.openedition.org/asiecentrale/3180?lang=en>

²⁰ United Nations (2019). Problems of the Aral Sea and water resources of Central Asia | Uzbekistan. [online] Un.int. Available at: <https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/problems-aral-sea-and-water-resources-central-asia>.

²¹ Shamsiyev Saidakbar (2024). Afg‘oniston “Qo‘shqepa”Ga Loyiqmi? *Journal of Sustainability in Integrated Policy and Practice*, [online] 2(1), pp.28–30. Available at: <https://journals.proindex.uz/index.php/SIPP/article/view/563> [Accessed 28 Jan. 2025].

Legal Opportunities of Central Asian Integration (In the context of Uzbekistan)

Every integration process must be based on legal frameworks. Legal agreements and contracts play a crucial role as the foundation of integration. The extent to which cooperation and unification are based on legal principles can be assessed through the frequency of meetings and communications between legislators and executives in the region, as well as through signed contracts and agreements. In the Central Asian region the main topics of discussion in intergovernmental meetings typically include political issues (such as events in Karakalpakstan and Kazakhstan in January, the Ukraine conflict), economic relations, security concerns (such as the Afghanistan issue), technological cooperation (transforming the region into a technological hub in the near future), ceremonial relations (events, holidays, state celebrations) and others. These interactions occur at various levels: presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers. The frequency of such meetings has significantly increased in recent years. For example, in 2015, the number of such meetings was 60 but, it has risen to 147 in 2023²². During these meetings, several trade-economic agreements, transport-logistical arrangements and environmental protection agreements have been signed. To solve common regional problems and implement large-scale projects, regional and international organizations, working groups, and commissions have been established. Some examples include the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC)²³, Central Asia Heads of State Consultative Meetings, International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), and others. On the international level, organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Turkic States Organization, and various programs by the European Union, such as the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCA), Central Asian Drug Action Program (CADAP), Border Management Program in Central Asia (BOMCA)²⁴ and the Central Asia Program by the University of Georgia in the United States, all contribute to regional cooperation²⁵.

Furthermore, the governments of Central Asian states are taking the initiative to deepen regional cooperation. The Presidents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Kasim-Jumart Tokayev are the primary initiators of regional integration. At the third Consultative Meeting in 2021, Shavkat Mirziyoyev proposed organizing several regional forums, including the Parliamentary Forum of the Region's States, Forum of Women Leaders, and the Central Asian Youth Forum²⁶. In the fourth meeting, he also proposed establishing a Meeting of Security Council and Special Services Heads²⁷. The sixth Consultative Meeting saw Tokayev suggest the creation of a Regional Security Agreement and emphasized the need for the region to transform into a "Middle Power"²⁸.

²² CENTRAL ASIAN REGIONAL INTERACTIONS IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT AIZADA NURIDDENOVA AND ZHANIBEK ARYNOV. (n.d.). Available at: https://oxussociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CA-Regional-Cooperation-Oxus-Reports-04-2024__FIN.pdf

²³ www.icwc-aral.uz. (n.d.). *Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia*. [online] Available at: <http://www.icwc-aral.uz/>

²⁴ home-affairs.ec.europa.eu. (n.d.). *Central Asia - European Commission*. [online] Available at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/international-affairs/collaboration-countries/central-asia_en

²⁵ <https://centralasiaprogram.org>. (n.d.). *The Central Asia Program (CAP) at George Washington University*. [online] Available at: <https://centralasiaprogram.org/>.

²⁶ President.uz. (2021). *Президент Узбекистана выступил на Консультативной встрече глав государств Центральной Азии*. [online] Available at: <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/4530> [Accessed 23 Dec. 2024].

²⁷ President.uz. (2022). *O'zbekiston Respublikasi Prezidenti Shavkat Mirziyoyevning Markaziy Osiyo davlatlari rahbarlarining to'rtinchi maslahat uchrashuvidagi nutqi*. [online] Available at: <https://president.uz/oz/lists/view/5360> [Accessed 23 Dec. 2024].

²⁸ Caciaanalyst.org. (2024). *Astana Summit and the Rise of Middle Powers in Central Asia*. [online] Available at: <https://www.caciaanalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13821-astana-summit-and-the-rise-of-middle-powers-in-central-asia.html> [Accessed 23 Dec. 2024].

Conclusion

When analyzing the opportunities of Central Asian integration for Uzbekistan, it is essential to understand the state's strong desire and intent to actively participate in this process. When considering integration, it is crucial to assess real opportunities of Uzbekistan through the lens of the regional geostrategic, geopolitical, and geoeconomics significance. Understanding how Uzbekistan can strategically leverage these opportunities is a critical and urgent matter. While it is true that regional integration comes with various risks, challenges, and potential threats, Uzbekistan can still gain significant political, economic, cultural, and ecological opportunities through Central Asian integration. This article has attempted to delve into and analyze these opportunities in depth.

References

1. Högselius, P. (2021). The hidden integration of Central Asia: the making of a region through technical infrastructures. *Central Asian Survey*, pp.1–21. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2021.1953963>.
2. Hopkirk, P. (2006). *The great game: on secret service in high Asia*. London: John Murray.
3. Admin, I. (n.d.). *Prospects for Regional Integration in Central Asia*. [online] Items. Available at: <https://items.ssrc.org/after-september-11/prospects-for-regional-integration-in-central-asia/>.
4. Brzezinski, Z., 2007. 219. In: *Second Chance, Catastrophic Leadership*, first edition ed. New York (USA): Basic Books, p.156.
5. Bucur, M. (2015). War and Regeneration: The Great War and Eugenics in Eastern Europe. *Region*, [online] 4(1), pp.31–43. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43737558> [Accessed 8 Apr. 2020].
6. www.un.org. (n.d.). *Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia United Nations Platform for Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones*. [online] Available at: <https://www.un.org/nwzf/content/treaty-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-central-asia>.
7. Safojev, S., 2005. Globalization and regional cooperation problems. In: P. Press, ed. *Geopolitics of Central Asia*. Tashkent: T. Rustamov, p. 160.
8. A statistician. (2023). *Uzbekistan: trade value with CIS countries 2023 | Statistics*. [online] Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1350400/uzbekistan-trade-value-with-cis-countries/> [Accessed 17 Dec. 2024].
9. The Prospect of Cooperation and Integration Among Central Asian States. (2023). Available at: https://nesa-center.org/dev/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2023-0113_The-Prospect-of-Cooperation-and-Integration-among-Central-Asian-States.pdf
10. World Bank. (n.d.). *Regional Cooperation Reduces Poverty and Builds Resilience in Central Asia*. [online] Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2023/12/06/regional-cooperation-reduces-poverty-and-builds-resilience-in-central-asia>.
11. The World Bank Regional Electricity Market Interconnectivity and Trade -Central Asia(P181214) Project Information Document (PID). (2023). Available at: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099100523132539287/pdf/P1812140c755ef090b30f0c40a9dc5720c.pdf> [Accessed 22 Dec. 2024].
12. Газета.uz. (2024). *Construction of China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway to begin on December 27*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gazeta.uz/oz/2024/12/21/uzb-kg-china/> [Accessed 22 Dec. 2024].
13. study.com. (2023). *Central Asia History, Countries & Culture | Study.com*. [online] Available at: <https://study.com/academy/lesson/history-central-asia-people-culture-religion.html> [Accessed 22 Dec. 2024].

14. worldometer (2019). *Population of Central Asia (2019) - Worldometers* . [online] Worldometers.info. Available at: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/central-asia-population/> .
15. Unesco.org. (2021). *Cultural Forum 'Central Asia at the Crossroads of Civilizations', Khiva, Uzbekistan, 2021 | Silk Roads Program* . [online] Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/cultural-forum-central-asia-crossroads-civilizations-khiva-uzbekistan-2021> [Accessed 22 Dec. 2024].
16. ESCAPE. (2022). *Central Asian countries advance cooperation on innovation and technology to promote digital transformation for sustainable development*. [online] Available at: <https://www.unescap.org/news/central-asian-countries-advance-cooperation-innovation-and-technology-promote-digital> [Accessed 22 Dec. 2024].
17. Anon, (2023). *The water crisis in Central Asia – how to find solutions? - CANEECCA: Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA)*. [online] Available at: <https://canecca.org/en/the-water-crisis-in-central-asia-how-to-find-solutions/>
18. president, U. (2022). *Uzbek president signs laws ratifying border, water resource accords with Kyrgyzstan*. [online] Aa.com.tr. Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/uzbek-president-signs-laws-ratifying-border-water-resource-accords-with-kyrgyzstan/2752252> [Accessed 22 Dec. 2024].
19. Janusz-Pawletta, B. and Gubaidullina, M. (2015). Transboundary Water Management in Central Asia. *Cahiers d'Asie centrale* , [online] (25), pp.195–215. Available at: <https://journals.openedition.org/asiacentrale/3180?lang=en>
20. United Nations (2019). *Problems of the Aral Sea and water resources of Central Asia Uzbekistan*. [online] Un.int. Available at: <https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/problems-aral-sea-and-water-resources-central-asia> .
21. Shamsiyev Saidakbar (2024). Afg‘Oniston “Qo‘Shtepa”Ga Loyiqmi? *Journal of Sustainability in Integrated Policy and Practice*, [online] 2(1), pp.28–30. Available at: <https://journals.proindex.uz/index.php/SIPP/article/view/563> [Accessed 28 Jan. 2025].
22. CENTRAL ASIAN REGIONAL INTERACTIONS IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT AIZADA NURIDDENOVA AND ZHANIBEK ARYNOV. (n.d.). Available at: https://oxussociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CA-Regional-Cooperation-Oxus-Reports-04-2024__FIN.pdf .
23. www.icwc-aral.uz. (n.d.). *Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia* . [online] Available at: <http://www.icwc-aral.uz/> .
24. home-affairs.ec.europa.eu. (n.d.). *Central Asia - European Commission* . [online] Available at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/international-affairs/collaboration-countries/central-asia_en .
25. <https://centralasiaprogram.org>. (n.d.). *The Central Asia Program (CAP) at George Washington University*. [online] Available at: <https://centralasiaprogram.org/> .
26. President.uz. (2021). *The President went to Uzbekistan for a consultative meeting of heads of state in Central Asia* . [online] Available at: <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/4530> [Accessed 23 Dec. 2024].
27. President.uz. (2022). *Speech of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the Fourth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia* . [online] Available at: <https://president.uz/oz/lists/view/5360> [Accessed 23 Dec. 2024].
28. Cacialanalyst.org. (2024). *Astana Summit and the Rise of Middle Powers in Central Asia* . [online] Available at: <https://www.cacialanalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13821-astana-summit-and-the-rise-of-middle-powers-in-central-asia.html> [Accessed 23 Dec. 2024].

29. This questionnaire is dedicated to the topic of Central Asian integration (2024). *This questionnaire is dedicated to the topic of Central Asian integration* . [online] Google Docs. Available at: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1XKBkxuKwaNf3SozRvAxouwxyGZUEUKv49LSuHkJ4vxU/edit#responses> [Accessed 23 Dec. 2024].